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Laura den Dulk¹ and Sandra Groeneveld¹

Abstract

This article examines the level of support for the integration of paid work and personal life (work–life balance [WLB] support) in public sector organizations in Europe. Data of the Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work-Life Balance 2004–2005 (ESWT) is used to analyze the supportiveness of public sector organizations within and between countries. So far, little attention has been paid to variation within the public sector and whether and to what degree this is related to institutional and economic drivers. The results suggest that institutional pressure is the most important driver for public sector organizations to offer WLB support to their employees: State support in a country has a positive relationship with WLB support in public organizations, in particular for public administration organizations. Little evidence for the relevance of economic drivers was found despite the introduction of new public management (NPM)-style reforms in the public sector.

Keywords

work–life balance, public sector, Europe, cross-national research

Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been growing attention toward the integration of paid work and personal/family life. The diversity of the workforce is increasing, and the number of people who combine tasks is growing. Like national governments, employers are aware of this social trend, with employees increasingly needing to divide their time and attention between the demands of their job and care tasks at

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home. Research shows that if combining work and family is problematic, people function less effectively at work and face increased risk of health problems, which consequently threaten the quality of organizations (Allen, Herst, Bruch, & Sutton, 2000; Dikkers, 2008; van Doorne-Huiskes, 1992).

Over the years, both public policies and organizational policies have been developed to support the integration of paid work and personal life. Some countries are more advanced than others in this regard. Scandinavian and post-socialist countries, for instance, are known for their relatively long tradition of state support, whereas in other countries like the Netherlands or Germany state support is relatively modest and a more recent phenomenon (den Dulk & van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007). In addition, within countries there is sufficient variance in the level of work–life support offered by employers. In most countries, public sector organizations and large companies are taking the lead regarding the introduction of workplace work–life policies that supplement existing legislation, such as leave arrangements and flexible working hours that support the integration of paid work and personal life (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2005; den Dulk, 2001; den Dulk, Peters, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2010; Evans, 2001; Goodstein, 1994).

This article focuses on workplace work–life balance (WLB) support in addition to state regulations in public sector organizations in Europe. How can we explain the level of WLB support within public sector organizations across Europe? Scholars have argued that the lack of market pressures explains the relatively high degree of WLB support in public sector organizations (den Dulk, 2001; Evans, 2001; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001). Reasons for public sector organizations to be supportive is related to their visibility in the public debate and because they are more likely to be evaluated according to government standards and norms, whereas for private sector companies, profit-related arguments are more important. However, public sector organizations vary in the degree of their sensitivity to government standards and norms (Antonsen & Beck Jørgensen, 1997; Bozeman & Moulton, in press). Some public sector organizations develop and implement government policies, and others operate more at a “distance” from politics and policy making. Public administration literature refers to the degree of publicness when discussing differences between organizations (Boyne, 2002). It can be expected that the more public sector organizations are subject to political pressure and involved in policy making, the more they will expose that—as an employer—they take policy measures in this direction.

Furthermore, with the introduction of new public management (NPM), business case arguments may have become more important in the public sector. Human resource management (HRM) policies are developed to improve the performance of the public sector workforce. In addition, recruiting and retaining personnel has become more important in public sector HRM, specifically due to decreasing labor supply on account of demographic developments in European countries. WLB support may serve as one of many instruments to attract and retain public sector employees. In fact, a Dutch survey showed that WLB as a motive to choose public sector employment has become

more important in recent years, in particular for women (Groeneveld, Steijn, & Van der Parre, 2009).

So far research has paid little attention to variation within the public sector regarding the development of HRM instruments like work–life policies but has merely contrasted public and private sector organizations (e.g., Boyne, Jenkins, & Poole, 1999). Whatever little research available that focused on WLB support offered by different types of public sector organizations indicates that size, recruitment, and retention issues; proportion of female workers; and unionization are relevant factors at the organizational level affecting the degree of WLB support within the public sector (Durst, 1999; Maxwell & McDougall, 2004; McCurdy, Newman, & Lovrich, 2002). Organizational characteristics included in these studies refer to economic considerations (organizational capacity) and internal institutional pressures (demands of female workers and unions). The scholars do recognize the impact of macro-level factors, such as government pressures and labor market conditions, but because these are all single-country studies they are not able to investigate how macro-level factors affect WLB support offered at the organizational level. The public sector, we will argue, consists of different subsectors, of which some are more sensitive to government pressure than others. In addition, not all European governments emphasize the importance of work–life policies to the same degree. As a result, the pressure to enhance WLB support in public sector organizations may vary across countries. In fact, the public sector forms an interesting case to examine the relationship between national policy context and organizational HRM policies (Perry, 2010) precisely because of the nonprofit nature of public sector organizations.

This article builds on and contributes to two bodies of knowledge: research on HRM and diversity policies in the public sector, and the work–family research field. Within both fields *large N, cross-national research* is limited. This is in particular true for data collected from organizations on HRM policies they implement and the way they extend statutory provisions. Most studies on diversity policies in the public sector are national employee surveys or case studies. Only a few organizational studies with larger samples exist (see, for exceptions, Groeneveld & Verbeek, in press; Kellough & Naff, 2004). Also in the work–family research field data collected at the organizational level are limited, which is also the case with cross-national studies conducted in the field (see, for an exception, den Dulk et al., 2010). Most large-scale studies are based on employee surveys. However, employees are not always aware whether their organization is offering additional arrangements or merely follows statutory requirements. We aim to contribute to filling this gap by using data of the Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work-Life Balance 2004-2005 (ESWT) of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. The ESWT provides information at the organization level on WLB support in 21 European countries. Theoretical explanations of work–life policies in organizations can be empirically tested by using the large-scale data set of the ESWT survey. By focusing on the public sector in Europe it is possible to put the *variation within the public sector* to the fore and test several assumptions about the motivations of public organizations to be

supportive to the WLB of employees. In the next section, the theoretical background of the study is discussed and hypotheses are formulated. Section 3 presents the research method, followed by the presentation of the findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Theory

Work–life policies are introduced to support employees in combining paid work and personal/family life. They can take the form of statutory provisions and be part of a collective agreement or a formal policy in the organization. Examples of work–life policies are flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work and working from home; leave arrangements such as parental, paternity, and emergency leave; care arrangements, including financial support, referral services, and domestic services; and supportive policies, such as training and counseling programs (den Dulk & Peper, 2009). Employees combining work and personal life generally need a “package” or a combination of facilities, depending on their life stage. For those with young children, childcare support is as important as the possibility to take up parental leave and having flexible working hours. For those with care responsibilities such as caring for seriously ill relatives, care leave and/or temporary reduction of working hours may be more important (den Dulk, 2001).

Both governments and employers in Europe are increasingly offering a wide range of work–life policies (den Dulk et al., 2010; Evans, 2001; OECD, 2007a). Reasons for organizations to introduce work–life policies in legislation include increasing the retention and selection of talented workers or increasing the productivity of employees (Appelbaum et al., 2005, den Dulk, 2001, Kossek & Friede, 2006). However, having policies is not the same as actually using them; access might be restricted and employees are not always aware of existing policies (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Budd & Mumford, 2005; den Dulk & Peper, 2007). Therefore, we use the term *work–life balance support* (WLB support), referring to both the presence of work–life policies in organizations and access and utilization of policies. By focusing on WLB support rather than work–family support we emphasize that private life encompasses more than the family role alone.¹

Two drivers have been put forward to explain WLB support in organizations: institutional pressure and economic considerations (Appelbaum et al., 2005; den Dulk, 2001; Poelmans, 2005). The (neo)institutional approach emphasizes that there is an increasing institutional pressure on organizations to develop work–life policies due to a changing workforce (more women and two-earner families) who wish to combine paid work with other responsibilities, public attention to these issues, and more state regulations. From the institutional perspective, the influence of legal and normative environment on organizational structures and practices is emphasized (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Organizations not only have to meet economic considerations but also need to respond to regulations, norms, laws, and social expectations

(Goodstein, 1994). The institutional approach points to the need for the legitimacy of the organization in the wider social structure. Variance between organizations is explained by the extent to which maintenance of social legitimacy is salient to organizations. In particular public sector organizations, like public administration, which operate in close vicinity of the development of state regulations, are likely to be more sensitive to government pressure and are often put forward as a role model of a good employer.

Based on the NACE classification, the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community, the article distinguishes between three public subsectors: (1) public administration (ministries, federal bodies, local authorities), (2) welfare state public organizations (health, social work, and education), and (3) other categories such as state-owned transport or energy companies. Public administration organizations on one hand and other public sector organizations on the other differ in their degree of publicness. Public administration organizations are more close to governmental policy making and are subject to stronger political authority than other public sector organizations operating more at a distance from the ministries. In addition, public administration organizations are expected to put more emphasis on public values (Antonsen & Beck Jørgensen, 1997; Bozeman & Moulton, in press). The higher level of publicness of public administration organizations would explain their stronger support for the WLB of their employees (as a value in itself). We therefore formulate the following hypothesis on the variation in WLB support within the public sector:

Hypothesis 1: Public administration organizations offer more WLB support than other public sector organizations.

NPM-style reforms in Europe aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector organizations have introduced private sector management techniques and business case arguments to the sector. One effect of NPM-style reforms was the replacement of traditional bureaucratic models of personnel management derived from HRM (Mesch, Perry, & Wise, 1995; Perry, 1993). Within the HRM context, employees are conceived as resources that should be developed according to the goals of the organization. Within this context economic considerations or *business case arguments* regarding WLB support become more salient. Organizations recognize the need of employees to integrate work and personal life but support work–life policies only when doing so is beneficial for the organization, for instance, if work–life policies increase the retention and selection of skilled workers or help to increase the productivity of employees (Appelbaum et al., 2005; den Dulk, 2001; Kossek & Friede, 2006). In other words, WLB support is offered because of business case arguments such as increasing the productivity and commitment of workers. Another reason why business case arguments may become more important in the public sector is the increasing need to compete with the private sector to attract valuable workers, particularly due to the growing labor market shortages and the aging workforce (Groeneveld et al., 2009).

Business case arguments are related to specific organizational characteristics such as size, percentage of female workers, and shortage of staff. Based on economic considerations, large organizations are more inclined to offer WLB support compared to small organizations because of economies of scale, which reduces the costs of WLB support per employee in their organizations. Hence, the adoption of workplace work-life policies is more costly for smaller organizations. Moreover, large organizations often have a specialized human resource staff, who are more likely to be aware of increasing demands for WLB support and will have more expertise to react to these developments (Morgan & Milliken, 1992).

The proportion of female employees is also a relevant organizational characteristic affecting business case arguments (see Poelmans, Chinchilla, & Cardona, 2003; Remery, van Doorne-Huiskes, & Schippers, 2003). Organizations with a substantial proportion of female employees may benefit more from the effect of WLB support on productivity, absenteeism, and turnover than male-dominated organizations (Goodstein, 1994; Lewis & Lewis, 1996); however, the skill level of the female workforce may be an important mediator here (Ingram & Simons, 1995). However, an institutional explanation can be given for the impact of size and proportion of female staff. Large organizations and organizations with a high share of female employees are expected to be more sensitive to institutional pressures to develop WLB support, compared to small organizations and organizations with a low share of female employees. Large organizations are more visible in society, which in turn increases their sensitivity to institutional pressures. A higher percentage of female employees will increase the demand for work-life policies within the organization, which may positively affect the degree of WLB support (Goodstein, 1994). Hence, on the basis of both institutional and economic considerations, we expect that the larger the organization and higher the share of female employees, the more WLB support offered by the organization.

An organizational characteristic in particular reflecting the impact of economic considerations is a shortage or strong competition for valuable workers. When organizations are experiencing a shortage of valuable workers WLB support as recruitment and retention tool will be particularly beneficial. Ackers (2003, pp. 227-288) concluded from his research that “the business case for harnessing human resources through work-family policies only works for certain employment groups, such as the more skilled and educated, during periods of full employment and labor scarcity.” With the introduction of NPM, business case arguments, such as a shortage of skilled staff, may have become more important in the public sector.

On the basis of the above observations, we formulate the following hypothesis on the effects of organizational characteristics on WLB support offered by public organizations:

Hypothesis 2: The larger the organization and higher the proportion of female employees and the more difficulties finding skilled personnel, the more WLB support offered by public sector organizations.

Public sector organizations act in various national environments in which the degree of state support varies. Some countries are characterized by extensive state support, offering generous leave arrangements, extensive public childcare and legislation encouraging flexible work arrangements, whereas in others legislation is more modest. Regarding the degree of state support, welfare state classifications (Anttonen & Sipilä, 1996; Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999) suggest that the state is an important provider of support in social democratic countries such as Sweden and Finland and in former socialist countries such as Bulgaria and Hungary, although in the latter state provisions have declined since the transition to a market economy (Wall, 2007). In conservative welfare states (Germany) and Mediterranean countries (Spain, Portugal), the family plays a more central role and state provision is more modest, whereas in liberal countries (United Kingdom), the market is considered the main provider of WLB support. Public provisions indicate a strong government commitment to the combination of work and family life and exert normative and coercive pressure on organizations to develop additional support. As argued before, public sector organizations are more evaluated according to government standards and norms and often put forward as role models. Hence, on the basis of institutional approach we expect in countries with strong state support for the combination of work and family life public sector organizations to be more active in providing additional workplace WLB support than in countries in which state support is more modest (Hypothesis 3). In addition, we expect that this type of institutional pressure is particularly relevant for public sector organizations closely related to public policy making, that is, public administration. In other words, the difference between subsectors is particularly strong in countries with high state support (Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 3: The more state support in a country for the combination of work and family life, the more WLB support in public sector organizations.

Hypothesis 4: The impact of state support on workplace WLB support is larger for public administration organizations than other public sector organizations.

Countries not only differ regarding the nature and degree of state support but also vary with respect to the prevalence of gender ideology and cultural assumptions about work and family. When gender equality is high on the political agenda, public organizations may also feel more inclined to offer WLB support. Lyness and Brumit Kropf (2005) used the United Nations Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) as an indicator for gender equality in their study on WLB support in organizations. Their findings show a positive relationship between national gender equality and perceived organizational WLB support. Therefore, we control for national gender equality in this study. In addition, we control for national labour market conditions by including the unemployment rate of countries since this might influence the business case of WLB support. The unemployment rate can be considered as an economic driver of WLB support in organizations and gender equality can be considered as an institutional factor at the country level.

Method

1. Data and Design

The data source used for this research was the ESWT (2004-2005) collected on behalf of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. In total, 21 European member states including 21,031 organizations and companies with 10 or more employees were surveyed. HRM managers and union representatives were interviewed over the phone. This study will only make use of the interviews with HRM managers in the public sector since union representatives given the small number of questions on WLB support. For this study we excluded Greece because of a lack of variation within the public sector (only public administration organizations participated in the research). Hence, our data set contains information on 4,642 public sector organization in 20 European countries.²

2. Measures

Dependent Variable

The focus in this study is on WLB support provided by public sector organizations extending state provisions and legislation. Within the ESWT survey HRM managers were asked whether the following work–life policies are offered by the organization:

1. Allowing part-time according to employee wishes,
2. Possibility to change from full-time to part-time employment for skilled work,
3. Possibility to change from full-time to part-time employment for unskilled work,
4. Flexible working hours,
5. Working time account (possibility to save hours to take a full day off),
6. Employees using parental leave in the past 3 years,
7. Long-term leave to take care of family members who are ill,
8. Long-term leave to pursue further education,
9. Long-term leave for other reasons,
10. Workplace crèche,
11. Other forms of childcare support, and
12. Support for domestic work (cleaning or shopping services).

A sum variable was constructed on the basis of these items: For each arrangement a score of 1 is given if the organization provides this option or let employees use it as is the case with parental leave. Regarding part-time work a score of 1 is given only when it is mainly used because of employees' wishes rather than company's needs. The score for WLB support ranges between 0 and 12, based on the number of policies offered. We did not vary the weight of the different policies since employees often

need a combination of policies that vary across life stages. Moreover, what would be an important policy offered by organizations varies by national context, for instance, when long hours are common, flexible work arrangements become highly relevant (Brannen & Lewis, 2000).

Independent Variables

Sector. To measure sector we constructed three dummy variables: public administration, welfare state public organizations (organizations in health, social work, and education), and other categories such as state-owned transport or energy companies. This classification into three subsectors was based on a combination of two sources:

1. Survey item: Does this establishment belong to the public sector (yes/no)? We selected the organizations that reported to belong to the public sector.
2. The NACE classification obtained from the sampling source (see ESWT sampling report, p. 20; see also Note 2).

Organizational Characteristics. Regarding *size* of the organization a distinction was made between small organizations (fewer than 20 employees), small to medium size (20-49 employees) organizations, medium-sized (50-249 employees) organizations, and large organizations (250 employees or more). The *proportion of women* was included with the following categories: less than 20% female staff, 20%-40%, 41%-60%, 61%-80%, and more than 80% of staff is female. Finally, the degree in which the organization experienced *difficulties finding skilled staff* (yes/no) was included as an organizational characteristic.

Country Characteristics. The variable of *state support* at the time of the survey is based on extensive desk research. Each country was rated according to public childcare provisions, parental leave arrangements, and support for flexible work arrangements on a 4-point scale (4 = *high state support* to 1 = *low state support*). High childcare support (Score 4) includes the right to a childcare place and high enrolment of both children younger than 3 years of age and older; medium-high state support (Score 3) refers to substantial enrolment of children younger (more than 30%) and older than 3 years of age, but no entitlement to childcare places (for instance, France and Belgium); medium-low (Score 2) implies almost no coverage of the young age group, but substantial enrolment among children older than 3 years of age; and low state support (Score 1) refers to very limited public childcare for both age groups.

Regarding parental leave provisions, length of leave, payment, and leave for fathers were taken into account. High state support (Score 4) was taken to refer to long, generous compensated leaves, including paternity leave and/or a specific daddy quota for fathers; medium-high state support (Score 3) for leave arrangements was taken to indicate long leaves and leave for fathers, but more minimal financial compensation; medium-low state support (Score 2) refers to shorter leave periods, more unpaid leave,

and/or the absence of specific leave for fathers; low state support (Score 1) implies both the absence of paternity and parental leave, as is the case in Switzerland.

State support regarding flexible work arrangements focused on the state regulations regarding the possibility to adjust working hours to caring or other responsibilities. High state support (Score 4) refers to the entitlement for all workers to extend or reduce working hours (as is the case in the Netherlands); medium-high support (Score 3) indicates the presence of an entitlement for working parents to reduce working hours when they have young children (for instance Sweden); medium-low support (Score 2) indicate a right to *request* reduction of working hours; low state support (Score 1) indicates the absence of a specific entitlement for workers or only regulations that stimulate employers. All three scores were summated.³ The scores ranged from *low* (Score 3) to *high* (Score 12) state support (see Table 1).

To control for the general labour market situation in a country, we used the *unemployment rate* of a particular country in the year of data collection (see Table 1). The GDI was included to control for the *degree of gender equality* in a country at the time of research. A high degree of gender equality may also give rise to more attention to work–life policies among employers (den Dulk et al., 2010; Lyness & Brumit Kropf, 2005). The GDI is based on the degree of gender equality regarding life expectancy, education, and income (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). Among the countries in our study it was found that Ireland, Sweden, and Luxembourg have the highest score and Eastern European countries general have the lowest (see Table 1).

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of all variables. Correlations can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Method

Two levels of measurement can be distinguished in our data: the level of countries ($n = 20$) and the level of organizations ($n = 4,642$). Organizations are nested within countries. In multilevel analysis this hierarchical structure of the data is properly captured. We estimated the multilevel models using SPSS (mixed models).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The average number of work–life policies offered by European public sector organizations in our sample is 4.25. Welfare state public organizations (organizations in health, social work, and education) show the highest score on WLB support (mean = 4.58). The average number of work–life policies offered by organizations in public administration is 4.41. The other public sector organizations show the lowest score (mean = 3.76).

The degree of WLB support offered by public sector organizations varies across countries. Public organizations in Finland offer most work–life policies (mean = 6.07), whereas public organizations in Cyprus have the lowest number of work–life policies

Table 1. State Support, Unemployment Rate, and GDI by Country, 2005

Data 2005	WLB state support	Unemployment rate	GDI	
			Rank	Value
Austria	8	5.8	17	0.937
Belgium	8	8.4	12	0.943
Cyprus	4	5.3	27	0.900
Czech Republic	7	8.0	28	0.881
Denmark	10	4.9	15	0.940
Finland	11	8.6	11	0.943
France	8	10.0	14	0.940
Germany	8	9.3	21	0.928
Hungary	7	7.1	30	0.867
Ireland	4	4.3	4	0.951
Italy	8	7.7	18	0.934
Latvia	6	8.9	41	0.843
Luxembourg	6	4.6	6	0.949
Netherlands	9	6.2	9	0.945
Poland	7	17.8	33	0.859
Portugal	8	7.5	26	0.902
Slovenia	9	6.5	24	0.908
Spain	6	9.1	19	0.933
Sweden	11	5.6	5	0.949
UK	6	4.8	16	0.938

Note: OECD = Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; GDI = The United Nations Gender-Related Development Index.

Sources: OECD data (OECD, 2007b; *PF2.1: Key Characteristics of Parental Leave Systems*), policies implemented on January 1, 2007 (retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/45/26/37864482.pdf>); Plantenga and Remery (2005); Immervoll and Barber (2005); *OECD Family Database* (OECD, 2010, p. 8), policies implemented on January 1, 2007 (retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/52/43199600.pdf>); United Nations Development Programme (2006; retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/>); and European Commission (2006) *Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion* (retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/social/keyDocuments.jsp?type=3&policyArea=81&subCategory=119&country=0&year=0&advSearchKey=&mode=advancedSubmit&langId=en>).

(mean = 1.54). In general, it seems that public sector organizations in countries with a high level of state support offer more WLB support than public sector organizations in countries with lower levels of state support.

In most countries organizations in public administration and welfare state public organizations offer more WLB support than other public sector organizations. The difference in the average number of work–life policies between organizations in public administration and welfare state public organizations (health sector, education, and social work) varies across countries (see Table 3). In some countries public

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables in the Regression Analysis

	N	M	SD
Total score: Work–life balance support	4,642	4.25	2.12
Dummy sector: Public administration	4,642	0.33	0.47
Dummy sector: Health social work	4,642	0.34	0.47
Other dummy sectors	4,642	0.34	0.47
Dummy: Female employees, less than 20%	4,642	0.14	0.35
Dummy: Female employees, 20%-40%	4,642	0.13	0.33
Dummy: Female employees, 40%-60%	4,642	0.21	0.41
Dummy: Female employees, 60%-80%	4,642	0.25	0.43
Dummy: Female employees, 80%-100%	4,642	0.27	0.44
Dummy size: Fewer than 20 employees	4,642	0.20	0.40
Dummy size: 20 to 49 employees	4,642	0.24	0.43
Dummy size: 50 to 249 employees	4,642	0.33	0.47
Dummy size: More than 250 employees	4,642	0.23	0.42
Difficulties in finding staff for skilled jobs	4,623	0.29	0.46
Unemployment rate	4,642	8.22	3.61
Gender Development Index	4,642	.917	0.034
Total state support	4,642	7.94	1.64
Valid N (listwise)	4,623		

administration offers the highest number of work–life policies (e.g., the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland), whereas in other countries welfare state public organizations offer the highest level of WLB support (e.g., Spain, France, and Italy).

Hypotheses Testing

In order to explain differences in WLB support in public sector organizations and to test our hypotheses a multilevel regression analysis was performed. Table 4 presents the results of multilevel analyses with the total number of work–life policies offered by organizations (WLB support) as the dependent variable. To prevent problems of multicollinearity when estimating the model with interaction terms, the independent variables were standardized before they were adopted in the model.

Model 1 is an empty model that models the random effects of country and organization. The intraclass correlation is .2522 $(.268/ (.268 + .795))$ indicating that 25% of the variation in WLB support is accounted for by the country level. In Model 2 two sector dummies were adopted as independent variables. The results show that compared to organizations in public administration, organizations in the other public sectors offer less WLB support. In this simple model, our first hypothesis is confirmed: As public administration organizations are assumed to be most sensitive to (political) pressure to offer WLB support, it was expected that they would offer the highest number of policies. Adding the fixed effects of sector resulted in a significant improvement of the model. The deviance decreased with 78 ($df = 2, p < .001$).

Table 3. WLB (Work–Life Balance) Support in Public Sector Organizations in 20 European countries (Means)

Country	Public administration	Welfare state public organizations	Other public sector organizations	Total
Austria	5.167	2.553	3.394	4.355
Belgium	5.167	4.333	3.225	3.709
Cyprus	1.569	4.333	1.357	1.539
Czech Republic	3.818	3.000	3.233	3.434
Denmark	6.266	4.961	5.250	5.345
Finland	6.299	5.246	5.646	6.073
France	4.571	5.425	3.929	4.629
Germany	5.325	4.615	4.838	4.886
Hungary	3.323	2.500	3.145	3.267
Ireland	6.680	5.400	3.839	5.209
Italy	3.784	4.517	3.588	3.946
Latvia	3.257	4.164	3.954	3.720
Luxembourg	3.934	5.322	2.833	3.655
Netherlands	6.654	5.000	3.968	5.095
Poland	3.574	3.993	4.017	3.941
Portugal	2.260	6.048	2.485	2.385
Slovenia	3.288	2.560	2.767	2.812
Spain	3.211	3.750	2.077	2.773
Sweden	6.431	3.822	5.034	5.392
United Kingdom	5.128	3.963	4.340	4.214
Total	4.410	4.583	3.762	4.251

Model 3 controls for organizational characteristics: the proportion of female employees, the size of the organizations, and difficulties in finding skilled staff. The proportion of female employees is associated with WLB support in public organizations. The relationship between the proportion of female employees and WLB support seems to be curvilinear. For organizations with less than 80% female employees, the proportion of female employees positively affects WLB support. Organizations with more than 80% female employees offer more work–life policies than organizations where women are only a small minority, but probably not more than organizations where the proportion of female employees is more than 40%. The number of employees is positively associated with WLB support. Difficulties in finding staff for skilled jobs, however, does not affect WLB support by public organizations.

This model partly confirms Hypothesis 2: The larger the organization and the higher the proportion of female employees, the more WLB support offered by public sector organizations. Adding the fixed effects of the proportion of female employees, the size of the organizations and difficulties in finding skilled staff resulted in a significantly better fit of the model. The deviance decreased with 593 ($df = 8, p < .001$). In this model the sector differences are still significant. Organizational characteristics do

Table 4. Multilevel Analyses of the Effects of Sector, Organizational Characteristics, and Country Characteristics on Work–Life Balance (WLB) Support

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept		-0.11	-0.11	-0.11	-0.07	-0.06
Organizational characteristics						
Sector	Public administration	—	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
	Welfare state public organizations	—	-0.06***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***
	Other sectors	—	-0.15***	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.09***
	Proportion of female employees	—	—	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
	20%-40%	—	—	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
	40%-60%	—	—	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***
	60%-80%	—	—	0.20***	0.20***	0.20***
	80%-100%	—	—	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***
Size organization	<20 employees	—	—	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
	20-49	—	—	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***
	50-249	—	—	0.23***	0.23***	0.23***
	>250	—	—	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***
Problems finding skilled staff		—	—	0.01	0.01	0.01
Country characteristics						
Total state support		—	—	—	0.23**	0.22**
Gender Development Index (GDI)		—	—	—	0.18	0.18
Unemployment rate		—	—	—	0.03	0.04
Total State Support x Welfare State Public Organizations		—	—	—	—	-0.04***
Total State Support x Other Sectors		—	—	—	—	-0.03**
-2 log likelihood		12,145	12,067	11,474	11,469	11,475
df		3	5	13	16	18
χ^2 change		—	-78*** ($\Delta df = 2$)	-593*** ($\Delta df = 8$)	-5 ($\Delta df = 3$)	6 ($\Delta df = 2$)
Variance between organizations		0.795***	0.779***	0.679***	0.678***	0.678***
% explained variance		—	2	14.6	14.7	14.7
Variance between countries		0.268***	0.292***	0.246***	0.146***	0.139***
% explained variance		—	—	8.2	45.5	48.1
N (organizations)		4,623	4,623	4,623	4,623	4,623
N (countries)		20	20	20	20	20

Note: All variables have been standardized before they were entered into the equation
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

not explain the differences in the average number of work–life policies between public administration and the other sectors.

Model 4 adds three country characteristics to model 3: State support regarding work–life arrangements and two control variables, unemployment and the gender development index. State support is positively associated with WLB support offered by organizations. The conclusion that was based on the country differences in the previous section is confirmed by the multivariate analysis: Public sector organizations in countries with a high level of state support offer more WLB support than public sector organizations in countries with a lower level of state support. This confirms Hypothesis 3. Gender equality and unemployment are not associated with WLB support offered by organizations. Adding country characteristics to the model did not alter the effects of sector and organizational characteristics. Model 4 does not lead to a significantly better fit of the model: The deviance decreased with 5 ($df = 3, p > .1$).

Model 5 adds the interaction between sector and state support. Both interaction effects are statistically significant. Their negative sign confirms Hypothesis 4: It indicates that for welfare state public organizations and other public sector organizations the positive association between state support and WLB support offered by organizations is weaker compared to public administration organizations. In other words, organizations in public administration not only offer more WLB support compared to other public sector organizations, this difference between the sectors is also stronger in countries with high levels of state support. The effect sizes, however, are rather small. Hence, the differences between the public sectors must not be overstated. Adopting the interaction effects in the model did not significantly improve the model: The deviance increased with 6 ($df = 2, p > .1$).

Conclusion and Discussion

This article investigated the level of WLB balance support in public sector organizations in 20 European countries. Differences in WLB support are explained by considering both institutional and economic drivers. Based on the institutional theory we expected that public administration organizations are more likely to offer WLB support than welfare state public organizations and other public sector organizations (Hypothesis 1). The results confirmed this hypothesis. Public administration organizations do offer more WLB support than organizations in other public sectors. The second hypothesis on the impact of organizational characteristics was confirmed with respect to size and proportion of women: the larger the organization and the higher the proportion of female employees, the more WLB support offered by public organizations. Surprisingly, difficulties in findings skilled personnel did not matter significantly. Also at the country level the variable referring to economic considerations (unemployment rate) did not have a significant effect. The results also confirmed the third hypothesis regarding state support: the more state support in a country, the more WLB support in public sector organizations. Finally, Hypothesis 4 was confirmed: The association between state support and WLB support offered by organizations is stronger for organizations in public administration compared to welfare state public organizations and other public sector organizations.

To conclude, institutional pressures seem to be the most important driver for public organizations to offer WLB support. Moreover, this institutional pressure is larger for the public administration than for other public subsectors. We have found little evidence for the relevance of economic drivers despite the introduction of NPM-style reforms in the public sector. Hence, also for public sector organizations the increased interest in WLB support “is more easily attributed to a growing institutional view that work-family issues are a business concern than to empirical evidence that adopting such programs will yield large economic benefits” (Kossek et al., 1994, p. 1122).

To our knowledge, this is the first study that tested a theoretical framework to explain *variations within the public sector* regarding WLB support offered. Previous studies remained mainly exploratory in nature (Durst, 1999, p. 22; Maxwell & McDougall, 2004; McCurdy et al., 2002). The (neo)institutional theory offers an explanation as to why certain organizational characteristics are relevant in explaining differences in WLB support among public sector organizations: because they either increase sensitivity toward external institutional pressure or increase the level of internal pressures. Economic considerations were also assumed to play a role, but contrary to other studies examining variations in the public sector (Durst, 1999; Maxwell & McDougall, 2004) we did not find an effect of recruitment and retention problems.

The cross-national nature of the research allowed us to theorize about how country-level pressures (degree of state support) interact with organizational-level characteristics (type of public sector organization). The multilevel cross-national analysis indicates that institutional pressure at the national level has a positive impact on WLB support in public sector organizations, in particular among those with a high degree of publicness. Following the line of reasoning based on the institutional theory, we may also expect that public administration organizations will be less affected by economic considerations than public sector organizations operating at a greater distance from national politics. To test this expectation, effects of the interaction between sector and economic drivers (unemployment rate and difficulties finding skilled staff) need to be estimated.

The nature of the work conducted in an organization might be an *alternative explanation* for differences in WLB support across sectors, in addition to closeness to policy making. This is in particular relevant for flexible work arrangements, such as flexible working hours and working from home (teleworking), which are more difficult to provide in settings such as education and health organizations. However, our measurement of WLB support includes 12 different policies and does not include teleworking. Therefore, this might only apply for 2 of the 12 policies: flexible working hours and working time account (the latter to a lesser extent since saving up hours for a full-day-off is applicable in many work situations, except for teachers). Regarding leave arrangements and childcare support this explanation might be less relevant. Part-time work might be viewed as less suitable in some jobs like supervisors, but this is probably true for all sectors. Nevertheless, we would recommend future research to look into the relationship between state support and organizational WLB support for different types of work-life policies in different sectors.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that institutional pressure plays the most important role in the degree of WLB support offered by public sector organizations. However, regarding two organizational conditions included in this study, organization size and

proportion of female employees, it can be argued that they are positively related to WLB support because they increase the sensitivity not only because of institutional pressure (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995) but also because of economic considerations (economies of scale and retention and attraction of female staff). In other words, we do not know whether these organizational conditions affect WLB support for reasons of legitimacy or for economic benefit of the organization. In the same vein, it can be argued that the impact of institutional pressure was measured indirectly by looking at the impact of sector and the interaction between sector and state support on the degree of WLB support. The data set does not include a direct measurement of institutional drivers, let alone the possibility to examine arguments by measuring variables. To examine the different logics—the logic of legitimacy and the business case argument—qualitative research is needed that digs deeper into the development of HRM policies in public organizations.

Related to this, *causality* questions can also be raised. In general, causality issues can be problematic, since we are working with cross-sectional data. In this article we assumed that a higher proportion of female staff leads to more WLB support; however, research also shows that WLB support sufficiently attracts female personnel. In fact, for many women the high degree of WLB support is a reason for choosing a job in the public sector (Steijn & Groeneveld, 2010).

A key relevance of this study is that it investigates the relationship between social policy context and HRM development in public sector organizations (Perry, 2010). Whereas we do find a relationship between state support and WLB support on the organizational level, there are possible confounding factors that affect both. Gender equality and unemployment are two of possible confounding factors controlled for in the statistical analyses. However, several changes on the labor market affect both public policies and organizational policies. In fact, both national and organizational WLB policies have been developed in response to the increasing diversity of the workforce and the growing number of people who combine tasks. The findings also show that the variance within countries is larger than that observed between countries. Hence, there appears to be a lot of leeway for public management to respond to the needs of public sector employees to combine work and private life. For instance, previous studies have indicated that unions can increase the pressure to develop WLB support particularly in relation to childcare support and leaves (McCurdy et al., 2002). Moreover, incorporating WLB in management development programs and increasing awareness and support from top managers may increase the degree of WLB support in public sector organizations.

Variation between public organizations has implications for equal access to WLB support. In case the level of state support is low, workers become more dependent on organizational provisions; however, WLB support is not evenly distributed, and this results in inequality in access. Moreover, a positive relationship between state and organizational support can ensure more equality of access and, at the same time, stimulate organizations to develop facilities that suit the specific needs of both the organization and the employees.

Appendix

Table A1. Pearson Correlations Between All Standardized Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Total WLB support	1.000																
2. Sector public administration	.051 ^{***}	1.000															
3. Sectors: health, social work, and education	.112 ^{***}	-.498 ^{***}	1.000														
4. Other sectors	-.164 ^{***}	-.496 ^{***}	-.507 ^{***}	1.000													
5. Total state support	.331 ^{***}	-.059 ^{***}	.173 ^{***}	-.115 ^{***}	1.000												
6. The United Nations Gender-Related Development Index	.235 ^{***}	.033 ^{***}	.048 ^{***}	-.081 ^{***}	.502 ^{***}	1.000											
7. Unemployment rate	-.070 ^{***}	-.055 ^{***}	.009 ^{***}	.046 ^{***}	-.191 ^{***}	-.507 ^{***}	1.000										
8. 0%-20% female employees	-.237 ^{***}	-.086 ^{***}	-.257 ^{***}	.343 ^{***}	-.074 ^{***}	-.017 ^{***}	-.007 ^{***}	1.000									
9. 20%-40% female employees	-.022 ^{***}	.040 ^{***}	-.186 ^{***}	.146 ^{***}	-.025 ^{***}	.000 ^{***}	-.011 ^{***}	-.154 ^{***}	1.000								
10. 40%-60% female employees	.055 ^{***}	.108 ^{***}	-.123 ^{***}	.016 ^{***}	-.015 ^{***}	.100 ^{***}	-.034 ^{***}	-.207 ^{***}	-.192 ^{***}	1.000							
11. 60%-80% female employees	.143 ^{***}	.101 ^{***}	.050 ^{***}	-.150 ^{***}	.046 ^{***}	-.003 ^{***}	.020 ^{***}	-.233 ^{***}	-.216 ^{***}	-.291 ^{***}	1.000						
12. 80%-100% female employees	.005 ^{***}	-.169 ^{***}	.415 ^{***}	-.247 ^{***}	.058 ^{***}	-.083 ^{***}	.040 ^{***}	-.247 ^{***}	-.229 ^{***}	-.309 ^{***}	-.348 ^{***}	1.000					
13. Size < 20	-.232 ^{***}	-.003 ^{***}	-.080 ^{***}	.083 ^{***}	-.057 ^{***}	-.024 ^{***}	.016 ^{***}	.076 ^{***}	-.015 ^{***}	-.017 ^{***}	-.095 ^{***}	.072 ^{***}	1.000				
14. Size 20 ≤ 49	-.110 ^{***}	-.021 ^{***}	.012 ^{***}	.009 ^{***}	-.004 ^{***}	.020 ^{***}	.007 ^{***}	.049 ^{***}	-.057 ^{***}	-.025 ^{***}	-.020 ^{***}	.056 ^{***}	-.284 ^{***}	1.000			
15. Size 50 ≤ 249	.056 ^{***}	-.029 ^{***}	.071 ^{***}	-.042 ^{***}	-.002 ^{***}	-.035 ^{***}	-.034 ^{***}	-.043 ^{***}	.027 ^{***}	.007 ^{***}	.006 ^{***}	.000 ^{***}	-.350 ^{***}	-.394 ^{***}	1.000		
16. Size ≥ 250	.27 ^{***}	.056 ^{***}	-.015 ^{***}	-.041 ^{***}	.060 ^{***}	.042 ^{***}	.016 ^{***}	-.075 ^{***}	.043 ^{***}	.034 ^{***}	.104 ^{***}	-.125 ^{***}	-.274 ^{***}	-.308 ^{***}	-.381 ^{***}	1.000	
17. Problems finding staff	.045 ^{***}	-.040 ^{***}	.023 ^{***}	.017 ^{***}	-.021 ^{***}	.020 ^{***}	-.070 ^{***}	.022 ^{***}	-.032 ^{***}	-.055 ^{***}	.039 ^{***}	.012 ^{***}	-.065 ^{***}	-.041 ^{***}	-.010 ^{***}	.115 ^{***}	1.000

Note: N = 4,623. WLB = work-life balance.

*Correlation is significant at .05 level (two-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at .01 level (two-tailed).

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Notes

1. For a more elaborate discussion of the concept work–life balance, see Lewis and Rapoport (2005); Gambles, Lewis, and Rapoport (2006); and Warhurst, Eikhof, and Haunschild (2008).
2. More information about the ESWT (Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work-Life Balance 2004-2005) and the quality of the data collected can be found at the website of the Economic and Social Data Service (<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5655>), which archives and distributes the ESWT data, sampling report, and technical report. The purpose of the ESWT survey was to build representative samples of establishments covering all sectors of activity in every participating country. The research team put much effort into the cross-national comparability of the survey, both with respect to the samples and the questionnaire items. The NACE sector classification was used as a standard classification of sectors for all countries.
3. More information about leave rates, public childcare availability, and state incentives for flexible working time schemes by country is available on request.

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